

# Jeremiah Returns to Jerusalem

*A Portrait of Judah L. Magnes*

By S. Ralph Harlow

ONE of the most inspiring hours of my life was spent recently on Mount Scopus in the company of Judah L. Magnes, chancellor of the Hebrew university. Here is a man through whom the prophets of Israel have found a voice. In him Jeremiah lives again amid circumstances strikingly similar to those of the days when Babylon thundered at the gates of the Beloved City. With little imagination one can see in the contending forces and the party strifes in Palestine today much that was present there in the sixth century before Christ. Nationalistic Zionism is a reincarnation of Zedekiah and his militaristic party; in the Arab political group the plottings of Egypt live again, and, while Britain of the labor party is by no means the Babylon of Nebuchadnezzar, there is enough of similarity to see in these three elements the forces with which Jeremiah struggled in his day. Imperialism, nationalism, the war spirit—these are certainly present. It is with these forces that Judah Magnes has come in conflict. And through him the voice of Jeremiah is heard again in the streets of Jerusalem.

The life of this Jewish leader bears marked resemblance to the prophets of Israel as one follows his courageous career. In order to interpret more clearly his present position in Jerusalem, and his attitude toward the complex and dangerous problems involved, it is necessary to glance briefly at his past record.

The home of his childhood was Oakland, California, and from boyhood he was fired with a devotion to the spiritual heritage of his race. In 1894 he went to the University of Cincinnati with the purpose of fitting himself for the degree of rabbi and teacher. He was a fine athlete and a brilliant scholar. During his senior year at the university he was editor of the college annual. The dean attempted to censor the annual, with the result that Magnes resigned and invited the faculty to edit the annual. Out of this controversy a new president was elected to the university and the faculty strengthened. It was Magnes' first struggle against autocracy and he won.

## *A Youthful Crusader*

In 1900 he was graduated from the Hebrew Union college, one of the foremost schools for the training of rabbis. He was the valedictorian of his class and a thorough student of the Bible, the Talmud, Jewish theology and philosophy. Already he was interested in Zionism and in the problems of his people scattered over the face of the earth. He

flung himself into a study of Yiddish that he might talk with the masses of Jews who spoke that tongue. For several years he studied in Berlin and Heidelberg, and received his doctor of philosophy degree from the latter university. His passion to know his own people led him to make a tour on foot through the Jewish towns and villages of Galicia and Russian Poland. What he saw in those ghettos influenced his whole life.

He espoused Zionism but felt that Judaism was something deeper than a political or secular nationalism, that it was essentially a spiritual attitude toward life. Above all the sense that Israel's mission was prophetic grew upon him, a conviction that Israel had a mission to the nations. He says that a favorite verse with him was II Samuel 7:23, "A unique nation," and that uniqueness lay for him in Israel's spiritual heritage of justice, mercy, truth and the consciousness of a living God. Zionism must involve a return of Israel's exiles to the homeland; but not as a political move with nationalistic fanaticism, but rather in order to give expression to the Jewish soul and to Jewish culture, and that righteousness and justice might triumph in the social order. This was in the days when Zionism was held to be an idle dream among most American Jews.

## *An Uncomfortable Preacher*

After a year on the staff of his own theological school he accepted a call to the pulpit of one of the most important and wealthy congregations in a Brooklyn temple of the reformed group. As in our own Christian churches liberalism in theology does not mean liberalism in political or economic outlook, and churches and temples which glory in their liberal theology are often hidebound centers of social conservatism. Thus the socially élite Jews of his congregation soon discovered that they had a prophet in their pulpit rather than a merely cultured preacher of literary efforts. Into the pews of this fashionable house of worship came an increasing stream of Jews from the ghettos of Williamsburg and Brownsville. Even as "all Christians are one in Christ" so "all in Israel are brethren"; and in just the same way that Christians fail, even in houses dedicated to spiritual worship, to practice that ideal, so Jews fail likewise. Charity and philanthropy we are willing to share with our less favored kindred, but let them not try to sit in the same pews and bow their heads in prayer beside ours!

Meanwhile Judah Magnes was speaking to growing crowds outside his own temple. He was organiz-



ing the Federation of American Zionists and spoke night after night to great crowds of East Side Jews quickening in them devotion to Israel's spiritual heritage and awakening in their hearts new hopes of rebuilding Zion. He wrote constantly in Yiddish, though we may guess his readers were not of his own congregation.

Then came the terrible pogroms in Russia when under the tsarist reign of terror Kishineff ran red with blood as the Holy Orthodox church attempted to "convert" to "the true faith" the people of Israel. It was Judah Magnes who organized and headed a great parade, which marched up Fifth avenue to arouse the American conscience to protest against these atrocities. As they marched the rector of Grace Episcopal church had the bells tolled in sympathy. Dr. Magnes began speaking on street corners and in crowded halls on behalf of persecuted Jewry. He was becoming that most dangerous of all persons to respectable congregations of cultured and wealthy folk, an agitator, a stump-speaker, a soap-box orator. His Brooklyn congregation gave him an ultimatum to abandon his street speaking and stirring of the "masses" or resign. He resigned. The prophet in his soul was finding voice.

#### *At Temple Emanu-El*

Strange to say, his dismissal from one important pulpit for his radical views and actions led to a call to a far more important pulpit in New York city, that of Temple Emanu-El. The late great leader of Zionism, Louis Marshall, had heard Rabbi Magnes speak at a mass meeting and was won by his magnetic personality and honest conviction.

As rabbi of Temple Emanu-El a friend said of his ministry, "Dr. Magnes graced the pulpit of that great temple as no rabbi did before or has done since." But it is not strange that his service there was of short duration. The east side crowds that had hung on his words in Brooklyn now crossed over to fill the pews of the temple on Fifth avenue. Moreover this young and fearless rabbi's chief interest lay with the great masses of his people rather than with the wealthy minority at the top. It was as a prophet of Israel, and even of humanity, that he felt called, rather than as minister to a small and socially élite class. His sermons burned with the fire of the prophets; he poured forth hot indignation on luxury at ease, on economic injustice, on the forces which gave abundance into the laps of the few and brought poverty and degradation to multitudes.

Nor was this prophetic rabbi content with the elaborate and liturgical ceremonies of his temple. He drew up plans for reform and submitted them to a committee. The committee rejected them and the minister resigned. From this liberal temple he went as rabbi to the oldest orthodox synagogue in New York. Here he felt he might find sympathy with his intensely Jewish message. His disillusionment was

sudden and complete. If one hopes to discover in conservative and tradition-bound orthodoxy any spiritual fire of the prophetic type one is bound to suffer a rude awakening.

Judah Magnes left the strictly religious field and attempted to organize the Jewish groups in and around New York into one central body, the various schools, lodges, temples, synagogues, labor unions, social clubs and Zionist societies being represented in the central Kehillah. Through this organization he was able to help standardize religious education among the Jewish youth of New York city and also to help the Jewish labor groups through new and better modes of arbitration between employers and employes.

Then came the world war. In the face of the hysteria and blood-lust of that hour he took his stand with such men as John Haynes Holmes and Norman Thomas. Humanity was above Judaism, yet he felt that never in his life was he more loyal to the ideals of the prophets of Israel. He shared with other great souls the bitter persecution which rabid nationalism in war visits upon those who will not sell their souls to Cæsar.

#### *During the World War*

With the close of the world war talk of the restoration of Palestine to the Jews was in the air. Now, in the hour when his dearest dreams and life-long aspirations seemed about to be fulfilled, came his greatest and severest test. The founding of the new Hebrew university was the first step which Israel took toward rehabilitating Jewish culture in Palestine and Judah Magnes was asked to undertake the organizing of the university. On its establishment he was elected chancellor, partly with the hope that he would bury himself in the classroom. Those who expected any such outcome must be bitterly disappointed. From Mount Scopus the voice of this prophetic spirit has gone forth with greater and increasing power.

There is no need here to go into the delicacy of that situation. In Jerusalem this year I have had opportunity of seeing and talking with some of the leaders in this drama. These included such men as Sir John Hope Simpson, whose report caused such a stir; with the Grand Mufti, head of the Supreme Moslem council; with several leaders of the Zionist movement; and I am utterly convinced that if Dr. Judah L. Magnes could lead the minds and thoughts of the people in Palestine today the Arab-Jewish problem would be settled and settled right. Never in his prophetic career has he had to endure more blame and take such abuse as during these recent years in Palestine. Most of this criticism has come from his own people; especially from the extreme Zionists. Briefly Dr. Magnes stands for three things. Here are his own words: "As to what we should want here I can answer for myself in almost the same terms that



I have been using for many years: the right of immigration, the right to settle on the land, and the development of Hebrew life and culture."

### *Zionist Nationalism*

For the Zionist of the nationalistic cult this seems a betrayal of his dearest hopes. Of this nationalism Dr. Magnes gave me his words in writing: "Here in Palestine the Jewish people hopes to have its nationalism take root and develop. What will be the character of this nationalism? In their efforts to create a national organism here will the Jews prostrate themselves before the idols of economic imperialism and militarism, as some of the Hasmoneans did in their day, and as the Idumean Herod did in his? Is it possible that one of these days it will be regarded as political treason if someone repeats seriously in the streets of Jerusalem the doctrine of Isaiah, 'And they shall beat their swords into plowshares and shall not learn war any more'? Or if there be Jews in the land of Israel faithful to the teachings of the prophets of Israel and who would endeavor to build the ideal commonwealth, whereby Jerusalem would be redeemed and Zion would be ransomed through righteousness and peace?"

The chancellor believes that Israel has rights in Palestine which fair-minded Arabs will respect. Among other things he said, "I believe that equal rights of the Hebrew language in all schools and government institutions ought to be recognized as a matter of course. I have been amazed to find among Arab leaders opposition to this. They are willing to show honor to the Hebrew language but they want Arabic the one official language. They are as uncompromising for an Arab national state as are the extreme Zionists for a Jewish national state or government. What we need here is a bi-national country with a mandate held by Great Britain from the League of Nations. The language question should be removed from the realm of politics."

### *The Hunger for Power*

Long before the riots and killings at Hebron and Safed and in the streets of Jerusalem Dr. Magnes urged an attitude which would have prevented those tragic events and the hatred and pent-up bitterness which followed. Leaders among the Zionists have called him "soft-headed," but if ever I looked into the eyes of a man with courage it was when I sat in that office on Mount Scopus and talked with this rabbi of Israel. The utter lack of bitterness in his voice, the firmness of his mouth, the clarity of his thinking, the kindness in his eyes, impressed me deeply. Again and again my thoughts turned to Jeremiah and to One greater than Jeremiah. The chancellor of the Hebrew university would be the last to call himself a Christian, but I dare assert that in Jerusalem today there is no leader of whose life

and attitude one can discover more of that quality of human kindness and divine passion, which characterized Jesus, than in this son of Israel. "Christ-like" is the best definition I can give of his character.

Listen, for example, to these statements from his lips: 'Much of the theory of Zionism has been concerned with making the Jews into a 'normal' nation in Palestine 'like the Gentiles of the lands and families of the earth.' The desire for power and conquest seems to be normal to many human beings and groups, and we being the ruled everywhere, must here rule; being the minority everywhere, we must here be in the majority. There is the *wille zur macht*, the state, the army, the frontiers. We have been in exile; now we are to be masters. We are to have a fatherland, and we are to encourage the feelings of pride, honor, glory that are part of the paraphernalia of the ordinary nationalistic patriotism. In the face of such danger one thinks of the dignity and originality of that assertion which praises the Lord of all things that 'Israel's portion is not like theirs and our lot not like the nations of the earth.'" Let me add, that there may be no misunderstanding of these words, that Dr. Magnes impressed me largely because of his humility and lack of any ecclesiastical or academic conceit, which so frequently one detects in otherwise great and good men. And in his thought that Israel's portion is a unique one, there is none whatever of the orthodox conception of a "chosen race" in which divine "favoritism" plays a leading role. Through the prophets of Israel, and I am sure he would add, through Jesus, the Jews have been given a heritage that calls them to share with all humanity the spiritual blessings of God's revelation.

### *No Low Means to High Ends*

His argument against "the way of the Gentiles" gives an insight into how far he will go for his spiritual convictions. "It is argued," said he, "that when we become the rulers we shall then know how just and generous a people in power can be. That is like the man who says that he will do anything and everything to get rich, so that he may do good with the money thus accumulated. Sometimes he never grows rich—he fails. And if he does grow rich under those circumstances his power of doing good has been atrophied from long lack of use. In other words, I am convinced that it is not only the end which for Israel must be desirable, but what is of equal importance the means must be conceived and brought forth in cleanliness. To keep others from their just rights with bayonets will lead to moral degeneration and a hatred which will breed violence.' I fear such demoralization. *For the Jewish people no high end will ever justify low means.* I have been told by Englishmen and Jews that the Joshua method is the only one which will bring success. I refuse to believe it, and I know that there are many plain Jews who have come here to work and live and who do not believe



it. If it were true the Jewish people, thank God, would never be successful as conquerors. Neither the hostile world nor their own souls will let them."

### *Reliance on Bayonets*

As to pacifism, Dr. Magnes said, "I have no illusions about the Jews here becoming a Quaker community. That would be too good to be true. I believe in adequate police protection, but what I am trying to drive at is to distinguish between two policies. One maintains that we can establish a Jewish home through the suppression of the political aspirations of the Arabs, and therefore a home necessarily established on bayonets over a long period—a policy which I think is bound to fail because of the violence it would arouse against us, and because good opinion in Britain and the conscience of the Jewish people itself would revolt against it. The other policy holds that we can establish a home here only as democrats and internationalists, thus being just and helpful to others, and that we ask for the protection of life and property the while we are eagerly and intelligently and sincerely at work to find a *modus vivendi* et operandi with our neighbors. The world—not in Palestine alone—may be bent upon violence and bloodshed. But how far greater a chance there is of averting this tragedy and bloodshed here in Palestine, if we make every possible effort politically as well as in other ways to work hand in hand—as teachers, helpers, friends—with this awakening Arab world?"

As to the possibility of failure, Dr. Magnes said, "I do not want it to fail, and the only way it can succeed, so it seems to me, is through making use of all the ways of civilization except bayonets: spiritual, intellectual, social, cultural, financial, economic, medical, brotherly, friendly methods." Concerning concrete ways and means of working out the political aspects of the problem he suggests the creation of two houses, an upper and a lower house. The lower house he would have elected by all the people, which would give a large Arab majority. In the upper house, he would have election or appointment upon the basis of equality of the three nationalities most concerned in Palestine today, Jewish, Arab, British.

### *Spiritual Freedom Must Have First Place*

But it is with spiritual freedom that this prophet is most deeply concerned. Said he, "I am afraid that the exile of a people does not end by political fiat and that redemption does not begin with political favoritism. It is only the exiled people itself that can put an end to its exile through its inner freedom and inexorable will, and it is only through its own hard day by day labor and unchanging faith that a people can be redeemed. In a world of growing imperialism and militarism how secure would any freedom really be based on political arrangements and vague decrees? The 'peace conference' which was supposed to give freedom to the people knew little about freedom. Nor did it have the right to 'give Palestine' to the Jews or the Tyrol to Italy or parts of Germany to Poland. If democracy means anything in the world today it means that the peace treaty was a flagrant denial of the essentials on which true freedom can be established. Our future in Palestine has been burdened by this 'gift.'"

Our hour together was all too short. Here was a man who made me think indeed of those troublous times when in the streets of this same city Jeremiah had pled against the nationalistic parties and pled in vain. Above the chauvinism and jingoism of his generation that mighty prophet had lifted his voice. The afternoon before my conference with Dr. Magnes, my wife and I walked out the three miles, over the ancient, worn road to Anathoth, just to sit for a while on the hilltop where Jeremiah faced his great decisions. Outside the university I asked Dr. Magnes to stand for a moment while I took his photograph. With a purpose I asked him to stand in such a position that behind him two miles away rose the hill of Anathoth. And then, when the picture was taken, we turned and looked down on Jerusalem. Jeremiah has come to Jerusalem again, and will history repeat itself? But for those of us who read these words of this Jewish prophet of our generation is there not a challenge which has implications that reach far beyond the borders of Palestine and that call to mind the person and the words of One whom we believe was greater than Jeremiah?

Constantinople, June 17th, 1931.